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Learning From Service With the Elderly

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Service is a great way to learn because we experience the world firsthand. I was a student in ENGL 108. This course had a service-learning component, and I served at Westminster Village Retirement Home in West Lafayette. I worked with a wonderful volunteer coordinator named Shirley Bentley. Everyone at Westminster was very willing to help me get started, and that feeling continued throughout my time at Westminster. I felt a connection with the residents as well as the workers caring for them. The residents have lived a life full of joy, heartache, and passion. They know what it means to live; they are experienced. Life for the elderly can be difficult, but most are still just as stubborn and filled with life as you and I. I saw one woman who had to be spoon-fed, and the nurse feeding her had to coax her into eating every bite. I don't say this to scare anyone about getting old, but rather to help them understand the reality that many of the elderly are living. I realized that volunteering is a great opportunity to connect with those around you and feel a sense of belonging.

I enjoyed playing the violin for the residents. I played songs from the *Phantom of the Opera*, Mozart, Czardas, and Bach. I do not think that I have ever played for a more grateful group of people in my life. They loved listening to the music and enjoyed the fact that there was someone there to play for them. They did not care if I missed a note or lost my place; they knew how to appreciate a rare experience. This is an important lesson for all of us.

Another learning opportunity was seeing the difference that a young college student can make at an institution like

Westminster. While I was volunteering, Westminster was able to catch up with computer input. I spent hours working with Excel, adding up hours by hand, putting them into cells, and running calculations. This was an important service because Westminster gets certain benefits based on the number of volunteer hours they have. It was very satisfying knowing that I could help them in a meaningful way.

One way that we can create a sense of belonging is through the relationships we form. Once, while doing activities with the elderly residents, a director and I were looking for something in an Eye Spy game, and I said, "Waaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiit" in a funny voice while straining my eyes to see an object. The director just laughed. She then said that I was weird, which is something that I already knew. Then she said something that really surprised me: "That's why you fit in here." It was a simple phrase that was mentioned in passing, but it really struck me. I initially felt that I was just coming in as an outsider to accomplish some task for the retirement home. However, I now see that I had inadvertently created a niche, and the people there, both workers and residents, felt that I belonged. Volunteering created an opportunity to connect with those around me. Feeling that we belong is very important to humans—emotionally, psychologically, and socially. Aristotle once said that organizing ourselves is just a natural extension of who we are as human beings, and perhaps service is a way to do that. Through this volunteer experience, I became a part of the community. I created friendships that will be meaningful for years to come.

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